1: Rosen E-5 (1901-1902) 1924 SK6 Choroti SK6

arrived at this plantation to look for work. Led by their chiefs, they had made the long journey from the region of their homes. The chiefs, some of whom had met us in the Chaco, whilst others had only heard of us, wished to pay us a call. Personally I do not possess any notes about this reception, but I have come across some in Fries' diary. He thus refers to the incident: »When the Choroti Indians, whom we knew from Tatarenda and who were now working here, saw us, they came, almost to a man, and greeted us, being evidently very glad to meet us again. *The principal chief, at the head of all the lesser caziques*, was among those who came and paid us their respects.»[1]

A favoured position in the village community is that held by the medicine men; for their services they are rewarded by a — from a Choroti point of view — generous remuneration in the form of food and drink. That among the Choroti the medicine men are held in great esteem, and that everybody is anxious to be on good terms with them, appears only natural to anyone with a knowledge of what an important part magical conceptions play with these Indians. It is largely by the Finlander explorer, Rafael Karsten — oft-quoted in the present work — that ethnological science has been enriched by information and detailed reports on the magical customs and practices of the Choroti, as well as of other Chaco tribes.[2]

The Choroti Indians believe that man, all his life through, is more or less subject to influences from spirits, who, on the whole, are of a harmful nature. Especial danger is to be apprehended from spirits on certain occasions such as child-birth, pubescence and death. Usually the evil is worked by a spirit, »mohsek», entering a person through one of the orifices of his body and thereby assuming possession of him. If at birth a child is deformed or very sickly, it is supposed to be possessed by some evil »moshek», and is on that account killed.[3] When a girl has attained the age of puberty, during the first critical, time she must keep a covering over her head, so that no evil spirit may be able to enter her body by way of her nose, mouth, eyes or ears.[4] The occasion of a girl attaining puberty is celebrated with a dance which undoubtedly is of a magical

[1] Professor Robert Fries: diary, X, p. 14. Italics by von Rosen.
[2] See Bibliography attached.
[3] Karsten (4), p. 176.
[4] Karsten (4), p. 165.

1: Rosen E-5 (1901-1902) 1924 SK6 Choroti SK6

776 [764] character.[1] When there has been a death in a village, certain precautionary measures have to be taken in order that the spirit who caused the death may not in some way or other work further evil.

But also on all other possible occasions the spirits are capable of working harm, indeed, Karsten is of opinion that the Indians, even when doing such commonplace acts as eating and drinking, fear that malicious spirits may surreptiously effect an entrance into them along with the food or drink.[2] That the Indians have this belief is not so very remarkable. Similar conceptions are to be found among many peoples in different continents, and have also been widely spread in Europe. To mention one instance; in olden times on yawning or sneezing there was the custom of making the sign of the cross before the mouth, a custom founded on the fear that the devil or some of his kindred should slip in through the open mouth.

751 As a means of protecting themselves against evil spirits, or for securing, in a magical way, other advantages, the Choroti make use of a variety of devices, the most important of which are the covering of the body, painting of the face, dyeing textiles and other objects red, tattooing, wearing of amulets and certain ornaments, singing, blowing of whistles and shaking rattles, beating of drums, dancing, games of hazard, cutting or pulling out of hairs, and blood-letting.

The custom, previously mentioned, of the girls at their first menstruation keeping their heads covered with a cloth, is an instance of the first-mentioned magical means of protection.

302 751 At dances and lovers' meetings the Indians paint their faces (see page 78), but they adorn themselves by face-painting also on other occasions. As an instance, men as well as women usually had their faces painted when visiting us in our camp. At the time we took this to be a manifestation of Indian vanity, but after having read Karsten's detailed account of the reasons for painting the face among the Indians, I am more inclined to the belief that this painting had been applied as a protection against such unknown spirit forces as might possibly threaten them in the camp of the whites.

831 302 751 That painting of the face is done at dances and meetings of a sexual character, is a circumstance connected with the Indian belief that occasions

[1] Karsten (1), p. 36, and (1), p. 17.
[2] Karsten (3), p. 205.

2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 SI7 Mataco

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and ornaments, wearing many-coloured mantles, necklaces, ear-tubes, big ostrich plumes on the head, and having the face painted. The men form a circle round the girls with arms interlaced round each others' waists. The dance chiefly consists in jumping with both feet at once and stamping hard upon the ground to the measure of a very noisy but monotonous chant. The ceremony is called *níssammaha aséhne*, »to hurry on the girls». The expression »to hurry on» (*níssammaha*), as we shall find later, is used by the Chaco Indians in many cases where there is a question of magically influencing the course of nature for good and useful ends. Just as the Indians believe they can hurry on or promote the growth of the fruit by influencing the tree spirits and by exorcising the evil demons who are trying to blight them, so they »hurry on» the girls in the sense that by the dancing and chanting the latter are prompted to make a definitive choice of a husband, whereas at the same time evil spirits are kept away from them. Courtship and marriage, it should be noted, are of those numerous critical occasions in human life when malignant supernatural powers are believed to be more than otherwise on the alert to do harm and spoil the good designs of men, and as usual the weaker sex is supposed to be particularly exposed to them. The courting dance *Avúshe* is thus in part held with the intention of keeping off this invisible molestation, so that the girl's choice of a consort for life may take place under good auspices.

A man who is not taken away from the dance by a girl has no possibility of getting either a temporary paramour or a wife. The matter wholly depends on the girls, and there are of course always men who for one reason or another are despised. I sometimes noticed such unfortunate lovers at the Choroti dances. Their experience had led them not to take part in the dances; they were sitting in a hut close by, eagerly shaking the rattle gourd (*pelíte*), as they said, »to hurry on the girls» and thus possibly to have better luck in the future. Since the women are much fewer in number than the men, it is necessary that some men are obliged to remain bachelors all their lives. These men were ridiculed not only by the women but also by their more fortunate brethren. On the other hand, there are no unmarried women, and even widows soon remarry unless they are very old.

The men may try to attract the girls at the dances by their beautiful ostrich plumes, necklaces, and other ornaments, but these means of attraction certainly only play a subordinate part. The Choroti woman evidently expects something more of a man whom she thinks of marrying

2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 S17 Mataco S17
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rare in all South America, and in the Chaco they are found only among such an advanced tribe as the Tobas, and, in a certain sense, among the Lenguas. The latter Indians, according to Mr. Grubb, ascribe the creation of all things and of man to a being disguised as a beetle, but this being is without moral attributes and in fact is only of purely mythological interest. As to the Tobas, they believe in two high gods or Supreme Beings, who — just as is the case with the Creator-Beetle of the Lenguas — only figure in their mythology but play no rôle in their practical religion. Moreover, the ideas they entertain about these Supreme Beings are not consistent but seem to represent two different stages in the evolution of their religious thought. These beings are especially spoken of as the creators of the world and of mankind. According to the apparently older version, all things were made by a bad deity Kaloaraik, «The Evil One», who created the world as miserable and full of suffering as it actually is in the mind of the Tobas. Again, according to the younger version, the world owes its origin to a good deity Peritnalik, who created things good and useful and thenceforward took benevolent care of mankind.

Since no kind of worship is paid to these Supreme Beings they have more interest from a mythological than from a religious point of view. I shall therefore deal with them again in a later chapter in connection with other myths of the Tobas.

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In practical religion spirits of a lower order play the main rôle. Of these spirits some are in their nature good, others again bad, but — as is usual among savage peoples — the latter impress the mind of the Indians more than the former and are therefore more conspicuous in their religion. The Choroti call these spirits *möhsek*, the Ashluslay *sitché*, the Mataco *aittah* or *nahüt*, and the Tobas *peyák*. In examining the different applications of this belief in spirits, we find that to the primitive Indians it is obviously of great practical importance: it compensates them for the lack of a notion of natural laws. Stupendous phenomena of nature, events otherwise unaccountable to them, especially disease and death, are explained as their mysterious actions. There are spirits inhabiting inanimate objects of nature and heavenly bodies, there are spirits embodied in animals and plants, and lastly, there are spirits who are not particularly attached to things animate or inanimate but have an independent existence, hovering about in the forests or on the plains, or in the air, causing such phenomena as thunder and lightning, eclipses of the sun and the moon, drought devastating hurricanes, etc. Worst of course are those demons who are regarded as the causes of disease and death, and

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in their magical dances and conjurations the Indians as a matter of fact most often deal with these particular evil spirits.

These are features common to the religious beliefs of all Indians of the Chaco; indeed they are found among all South American Indians. But even in the Chaco this general belief in spirits appears in somewhat different forms among different tribes. The *Choroti* fancy that the spirits, *möhsek*, in their external appearance have the shape of old, withered men (*kihilahs*). They are, in the imagination of the Indians, provided with wings, which enable them to move rapidly through the air. Owing to their bird-like appearance the spirits are also called *ahuna* (=the birdss). They are countless in number, mostly invisible, and as a general rule evilly disposed towards mankind. I never met an Indian who professed to have *seen* a *möhsek*, but nearly all say that they have *heard* their voices at night. One peculiarity of the demons of the Chaco Indians is that they only exist at night. As soon as darkness sets in the Choroti Indian fears mysterious dangers from the *möhsek*, who are then believed to draw near the villages in great numbers and even to enter into the huts, visiting the inhabitants with sickness and death. This is the reason why a traveller living with the Choroti can hear from some house nearly every night the low chant of some old man accompanied by the dull sound of the rattle-gourd, *pelite*, with which he tries to conjure and keep off the supernatural pests. At daybreak however the spirits are supposed to leave for the forests and the plains — with a piping or whistling sound, the Indians explained to me, which they are very clever in imitating. For this purpose the Choroti use a special kind of round whistle which they generally wear hanging round the neck as an ornament. At their religious dances they produce, from time to time, shrill whistling sounds with these whistles, professedly with a view to conjuring the *möhsek*. The Indians believe that they can keep supernatural beings at bay by imitating them in their external appearance or their sounds.

In the Chaco many weird sounds are heard at night which are apt to fill the natives with superstitious fear. The Choroti frequently told me about the »nightly whistling of the spirits« (*yaq möhsek ahuah*). The peculiar piping or whistling which is most often identified with the sound of the spirits is, I believe, produced by certain insects living on the stems or branches of the trees. The spirit of the tusca tree was specially mentioned to me, but this spirit is said to be a »good« being.

The idea of the Choroti, that the spirits have the shape of old men, has given rise to a peculiar and cruel custom. They do not allow their

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old men to die a natural death, but when they grow very weakly and sickly they kill them with an arrow-shot in the heart, whereupon they burn them with all their property instead of burying them, which among the Choroti is the general mode of disposing of the remains of the dead. The reason which they gave me for this custom was that if an old man is allowed to die a natural death he will be changed into an evil demon (*möhsek*), who will rage in the village and kill all the people. This, according to their idea, can be prevented by giving the old men a premature, violent death.[1]) In order to understand this custom we must, moreover, take into consideration that to the mind of these Indians *all* aged men are more or less versed in the magic art, *i. e.* are sorcerers, and the spirits of sorcerers are specially feared.

The fact that old men and sorcerers are believed to be transformed after death into evil *möhsek* seems to suggest that these spirits or demons are nothing but disembodied human souls, who have in the after-life been changed into supernatural and mostly evilly disposed beings. As a matter of fact, the death-spirit residing in the grave where a dead body has been buried is called *möhsek* by the Choroti. Like most other primitive peoples the Choroti fear the burial-places because they fear coming in contact with the spirits haunting these places. It seems therefore evident that at any rate the souls of certain persons are changed into *möhsek* after death. The word *möhsek* may therefore be best translated into 'ghost'. The Indians only use it of the disembodied souls or spirits of dead men, but not of the shadow-like »double» of a living person, for which they have no particular word. Even when speaking of a recently departed person they generally simply use the expression *yäl*, *i.e.* »the dead one». *Möhsek* particularly seems to have reference to the spirits of men who died long ago, and these spirits as a rule are more evilly disposed and more feared than the spirits of Indians recently departed.

The Choroti, like other Chaco Indians, do not deify inanimate objects of nature to the same extent as many other South American tribes. Yet

[1]) Nordenskiöld's categoric statement as to the practice of infanticide and parricide among the Choroti therefore is not correct. (»Der Mord beschränkt sich auf den Kinder- und Elternmord»; and: »Wenn ein Indianer seine alte blinde Mutter oder seinen verkrüppelten Vater tötet, so befreit er sie selbst von einem Leben das ihnen eine Last ist und sich selbst von einer Extramühe im Kampfe ums Dasein.» (*Indianerleben*, p. 38). As I have stated above, the killing of parents is limited to old men, and this custom must wholly be explained from the superstition of the Indians. Infanticide again is limited to the cases mentioned by me in a previous chapter.

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there are several evidences of a nature-animism, although as a general rule only such objects and phenomena as especially strike their imagination or with which some remarkable incidents are connected, are incidentally or permanently looked upon as being animated by spirits. There are evil demons in the sky, which among other things cause such strange phenomena as eclipses of the moon, of which the Choroti have the same idea as the Mataco and most other Chaco tribes. Other evil spirits of the sky cause drought, which in the Chaco forms the greatest obstacle to a successful cultivation of the fields. The demons keep the rain back, and the Indians in consequence try, during the dry season, to conjure them by drumming, shaking rattles and chanting so as to compel them to release rain. On the other hand, there are demons operating in the violent thunderstorms, although these are generally accompanied by torrents of rain. The Choroti believe that thunder and the flash of lightning are caused by a great number of *möhsek* who are rushing through the air and making an onset upon the village. These spirits are more often called *ahuéna*, »the birds», and thunder and lightning are therefore generally called by the Indians simply *ahuéna*, although the proper name in the Choroti language is *süntini*. Every time a burst of thunder is heard, the Indians, sitting in their huts, begin to shout and scream loudly, in order to frighten away the molesting supernatural visitors. There are evil spirits in the violent whirlwinds and sand-storms so common in the Chaco, as well as in the cold south wind, *niuk*, which during the dry season sweeps over the plains and produces rheumatism and chills among the natives, badly equipped as they are against cold weather. The warm north wind again, *ükine*, is sent by »good» spirits. Thus the radical contrast between the cold south wind and the warm north wind, both of which are sent by supernatural agents, has been to the Choroti the main reason for making a distinction between two of the four cardinal points.

Spirits, *möhsek*, are also believed to animate *trees* and *plants* — bad spirits poisonous and harmful plants, good spirits the beneficial and useful ones. The ideas which the Indians entertain about plant spirits and the customs to which they give rise, are substantially the same among all the tribes, and I shall presently give an account of them.

The Choroti also believe in *animal* demons. Thus they share the belief, held by all Indians in tropical and subtropical America, that a jaguar which attacks Indians or appears under unusual circumstances, is a »man-tiger» *i.e.* a man, generally a sorcerer, who has assumed the shape of this beast. Even in his lifetime a sorcerer may incidentally change

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776 himself into a jaguar and, appearing in this disguise, kill people. Similarly,
754 an evil wizard is believed to be able to send his soul into a horse, in which
825 shape he will kill the person whom he wishes to bewitch. The horse in fact is the particular shape in which the tutelary spirit of a sorcerer is believed to appear, and is therefore looked upon as a demoniacal animal. Of other animals which are looked upon with superstitious fear the deer must be especially mentioned. This shy and innocent animal is regarded as an evil spirit, a *möhsek*, and its flesh is never eaten by the Choroti. On this point these Indians share a belief which, curiously enough, is met with among many tribes in different parts of South America. In the noiseless movements of this animal and the mysterious rapidity with which it disappears into the forest there is in fact something »ghost-like», which is apt to awaken superstitious awe in primitive minds.

754 Just as a sorcerer is supposed to be able to change himself into a jaguar
825 when he wishes to harm other people, so he is also believed occasionally to assume, for the same purpose, the shape of a venomous reptile, for instance that of a rattlesnake. The bite of a venomous snake is generally attributed to the mysterious operation of an evil wizard.

776 Of spirits inhabiting what we should call inanimate objects the spi-
823 rits of the *stones* are of particular interest. In order to understand the ideas which the Choroti entertain in this respect it should be borne in mind that in the interior parts of the Gran Chaco, and particularly in the country inhabited by the Choroti, stones are extremely rare or almost unobtainable. It is in part due to this fact that the Choroti regard stones and pebbles in general with superstitious dread and would never, for instance, put on a necklace in which a stone of some kind entered as a decoration. The reason which they gave me for this aversion was that an evil spirit, a *möhsek*, dwells in the small stone and would infallibly invade the person who hung it on himself. The explanation was, moreover, added, that when a sorcerer bewitches an Indian he avails himself of a pebble-stone which he throws against his victim making him fall ill and
[755] die. Similarly, when the medicine-man cures the patient, he extracts the disease-demon in the form of a small stone. In other words, stones are shunned because they form one of the magic arrows which the sorcerers use to kill or harm their enemies.

753 The theory which the Choroti have formed about *sickness* and *disease* has appeared from some of the above statements. Sickness, like epidemic disease, is always due to supernatural operation. It is caused by a demon, a *möhsek*, directed by a human sorcerer. Wizards cause sickness by

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with the Indian himself: when intoxicated by brandy he gets mad and is always ready for fights and outrages; on the other hand, his own native beers comparatively seldom have such bad effects. As a rule they render him happy and joyful, virile and courageous, and make him forget the troubles and hardships of life. This is the reason why, to the Indian mind, there is a *good* deity or spirit residing in the native algaroba beer. But since this deity in the first place inspires the Indian with *virile* qualities, the drinking of this as well as of most other intoxicating drinks is strictly limited to the men. Women never drink algaroba beer, except perhaps some very old women who are freed from the restrictions normally laid upon the weaker sex.

The great drinking-feasts of the Chaco Indians during the »season» will be described later on, as also the ceremonies with which the sacred drinks are prepared.

When the Chaco Indians speak of their »good spirits», however, they generally mean spirits of another kind. The medicine-men as a rule speak of these spirits in the singular, meaning thereby a mysterious personal guardian spirit of their own. Such a being is for instance the *peyák nôtta* of the *Toba* medicine-man, a kind of individual guardian spirit with whom the Indian has entered into a special relation and whom he asks for assistance in sickness and in every necessity. Among the Tobas all professional medicine-men and many of the older men are said to have such guardian spirits; even some of the women, who then exercise the profession of female sorcerers. The more the person in question has acquired power over his or her »good spirit», the more that person is in possession of what we should call supernatural powers. When, for instance, the medicine-man has to cure a sick person, he summons his own guardian spirit and by his aid expels the disease-demon from the patient's body. Similarly, those sorcerers who practise black or nefárious magic are able to harm their fellows only by the aid of their assistant spirits whom they invoke and who will despatch a spirit against their victim.

If a sorcerer wishes to harm another sorcerer, who of course also has his guardian spirit, or some other person in possession of such a spirit, he can do so only by fighting and vanquishing the assistant spirit of that person. This was especially made clear to me by the *Choroti* Indians. A sorcerer who wants to kill or harm such a person, I was told, invokes his own »good spirit», this comes down from the heavens in the

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shape of a horse [1] — an animal which is regarded with superstition by the Choroti — and will kill the »good spirit» of the inimical sorcerer. The latter, being thus deprived of his assistant genius, will fall an easy victim to his assailant.

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The guardian spirit is not hereditary but is acquired individually in the course of life and to a certain degree through teaching. The older a person grows, the more power and influence he is believed, by the Tobas, to gain over his *ɲɛ̨ák nõtta*; hence the medicine-men are generally men of advanced age. The same may be said of the *Choroti*, who regard every old man as being more or less a sorcerer and endowed with supernatural powers. Since the women are always physically and spiritually weaker than men, they have always more difficulty in obtaining guardian spirits. I only know of a special initiation for women, who dedicate themselves to the exercise of the magic art, in the case of the Choroti. A women who wants to become a sorcerer, I was told, must eat a raw chirimoya fruit (*Anona chirimolia?*). When ripe, the chirimoya is edible and good; but in an unripe condition it is said to be poisonous, and a person eating of it according to the belief of the Indians will die or fall ill. If however the woman, while she is eating the raw fruit, performs the ceremony *Kausimã* with the magical rattle staffs, she will escape harm, and she will moreover in the future be able to conjure spirits with success. This idea is in fact typical of the initiation ceremonies of the Indians: the woman has been in contact with evil spirits but has been able to resist them, in consequence she has been rendered immune against them and acquired power over them which enables her to use them for her own ends in the future.

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Apart from the fact that the »good spirit» of the Choroti medicine-men is at least in some cases believed to appear in the form of a horse, the »good spirits» are in their external appearance like other spirits. The *Tobas* say that their *ɲɛ̨ák nõtta* dwells in the heavens (*piyim*) from where he comes down to assist the medicine-man who invokes him. Similarly the Choroti say that their *mõhsɛk eis*, when summond by the sorcerer comes down from the sky, but the »sky» (*põle*) is not to the Choroti a definite place like the *piyim* of the Tobas. *Piyim* has developed into a mythological concept: it signifies Paradise or the realm of the dead of the Toba Indians. When a Toba Indian dies, I was told,

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[1] Since the horse was introduced among the Chaco Indians by Europeans, this is not of course an original idea of the Choroti.

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in the conjurations of the Toba medicine-men, as we shall presently find.

These conjurations are varied with other manipulations, above all with blowing, spitting, and rubbing the bad spot. Massage regularly forms part of the treatment applied by the Chaco medicine-men, and is the only action which may really have relieving effects. — Ultimately the doctor again leans over the patient and starts to suck vigorously the bad spot. He turns away, spits and hawks up and behaves as if he were going to vomit. Thereupon he takes something from his mouth and, turning to the bystanders, shows it to them: it is the arrow, consisting of a pebble, a piece of bone, etc. which he pretends to have extracted from the patient's body. The latter should now recover; but it may be that there are several of them in his body, or that a new arrow is sent into it which he will feel on the following night. Generally therefore the treatment must be continued for several evenings.

The Choroti medicine-men also invoke their guardian spirits (*mōhsek eis*), and if they succeed in extracting the arrow, this is said to be ultimately due to the assistance of their good spirits. The invocation of the »good spirit« in connection with the treatment of sickness is however a form of worship that I have studied much better among the Mataco and the Tobas.

The *Mataco* have exactly the same theory as to the nature of bodily disorders as the Choroti, ascribing curable »sickness« to possession by an *aittáh slahsa* (a »little« *aittáh* or demon) and mortal epidemic disease to a *nahút*. The ultimate cause of sickness is witchcraft. To extract the »arrow« or splinter (*alák*) discharged by the demon or his human controller is the ultimate aim of the medicine-man. But he cannot do it with his own powers, he needs the aid of his »good spirit«, the *aittáh talák*. If the good spirit does not come down to his assistance, the patient is bound to die. The invocation of the good spirit, or the prayer, is therefore the last and decisive action of the medicine-man's treatment of the sick person.

Whereas the Choroti medicine-man does not generally use any magical instrument when he treats a patient, the particular instrument of the Mataco doctor is a sort of rattle, called *tahis*, consisting of a number of pieces of tin arranged round a circular piece of leather. When the instrument is shaken it produces a dull sound which is believed to inspire the spirits with fear. At certain other conjurations it is worn by the medicine-man like a cincture round the loins.